

# Analytic Theology and the Phenomenology of Faith

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**Abstract:** This article argues that analytic philosophy has a “convincingness deficit”; that proponents of the analytic method’s application to questions of theology must consider whether it is the best tool for the purpose at hand; and that phenomenology – in particular, Sartrean phenomenology – provides a useful methodological complement to the scholarly analysis of faith. After defining the convincingness deficit and what I take analytic theology to be, I defend phenomenology against the charge of “subjectivity” (voiced by Dennett and others) in order to argue that the varied ends of theological discourse require varied means – means which include phenomenology.

## Introduction

This article invites analytic theologians to reconsider the value of phenomenological approaches to faith. Given that continental criticisms of the analytic method have already been made by Merold Westphal and others much of what I have to say is not new. But my argument is distinctive in proposing that Sartrean phenomenology is a fruitful methodological resource. As a Christian theologian who teaches analytic philosophy of religion, I recognize that this move may seem ironic. But Sartre’s atheist philosophy contains many valuable insights.

In his chapter of the 2009 volume on analytic theology, Oliver Crisp writes that some theologians may view analytic theology as a “Trojan horse” which will smuggle “into the citadel of theology potentially destructive alien ideas” (2009, 34). In what follows I will argue that it is not so much “alien ideas” that may seem to pose a danger to “doing theology sensibly,” as Michael Rea puts it in his introduction to the same volume, but the horse itself: the analytic method may be deployed in certain contexts with success, but if, as in analytic philosophy of the Christian religion, it has what I will call a “convincingness deficit,” theologians need to ask if it is the best tool for the purpose at hand.

I will start by introducing the convincingness deficit. Then I will outline what I take to be “analytic theology,” and why I think a Sartrean phenomenological method could complement it. It is hoped that, along the way, we will clarify some confusions between the ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ approaches.

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## The convincingness deficit

Methodologically, the analytic approach assigns a great deal of weight to inference. Where matters of faith are concerned, however, both continental and analytic thinkers have questioned the role of inferentiality when it comes to theism. Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" is an obvious example of the former tradition saying that reason will only lead to a crossroads, at which point: the leap. In the analytic tradition consider, for example, the following three articles in the philosophy of religion: (1) Plantinga's modal ontological argument (1974); (2) William Rowe's "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" (1979); and (3) John Hawthorne's 2014 paper "Evil and Evidence." The salient feature of these three papers is that, in the conclusions of each, they concede limits to the persuasive power of inference. In the conclusion of (1), for example, Plantinga writes that he "obviously" hasn't given a "proof"; but rather evidence "that there is nothing *contrary to* reason or *irrational* in accepting [his argument...]" [I]t establishes, not the *truth* of theism, but its rational acceptability. And hence it accomplishes at least one of the aims of the tradition of natural theology." In section III of Rowe's paper, he asks what position the atheist should take with respect to the rationality of theistic belief and defends his "friendly atheism," which grants that theists may be rationally justified in believing the God of theism exists, even though their beliefs (on the atheist view) are false. And in Hawthorne's paper he advocates forms of "concessionary" theism he believes the theist should seriously consider. The devil, for me, is not in the details of their individual arguments, but rather in the common theme, well summarized by John Hawthorne's words, that: "Mere inferentiality doesn't make it good."

"Mere inferentiality" may be what makes things "good" in cases of formal logic. But when the subject matter is God, these analytic philosophers clearly do not expect their arguments to persuade others of their conclusions, even when those "others" are fellow philosophers. This raises interesting questions about disagreement, but what concerns us today is whether the analytic horse is fit for the theological Troy, so before going further I will clarify what I take "analytic theology" to be.

## Analytic theology

First, I take analytic theology to be a descendent of Christian analytic philosophy of religion. Lamenting theology's "continental captivity," Michael Rea writes that many theologians "seem to have very different ideas from analytic philosophers about how theology (and philosophy) ought to be done, and about the value of analytic approaches to theological topics" (2009, 1). I share his sentiment that the methodological divide is a "significant obstacle to fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue" (2009, 1–2), and agree that it is "an open and interesting question whether theology can sensibly be done in the analytic mode."

Indeed, as Oliver Crisp points out it is an open question—or at least, in his words, "difficult to say"—"precisely what analytic philosophy is." He goes on to give a characterization which, he notes, can be misleading without qualification, but which

is nonetheless indicative of some contemporary analytic approaches. The method, he writes, is that:

problems are broken down into their constituent parts, analyzed, and then reformed in an argument that attempts to make sense of the original problem. Here the analytic philosopher is rather like a mechanic who decides to strip an engine down in order to understand why it is making a peculiar rattling sound. He analyses the parts of the engine, cleans them up, and then reassembles the machine having satisfied himself that he has addressed the problem so that the engine will work properly once reformed. (Crisp 2009, 36)

One reason the phenomenologically inclined theologian might find such a method suspect – and contest that theology should be done *only* in the analytic mode – is that theological questions, unlike engines, affect the mechanic subjectively. This example raises questions of objectivity and subjectivity, and with them the potential for mutual misunderstanding, because these terms have different meanings in each tradition.

From the phenomenological perspective, to consider a theological “problem,” such as Christology or atonement, solely in terms of “breaking it down,” and to find its “solution” in a successful reconstruction which follows the rules of inference – may be to ignore the *lived* dimension of soteriology. The “subjectivity” of theological truth, on this phenomenological view of the lived experience of salvation, is not (just?) a matter of propositional relations but of personal transformation. The German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl criticized what he called “objective philosophy” for misunderstanding the world and the knowing subject’s place in it because, as Dermot Moran glosses it, “One cannot subtract the knowing subject from the process of knowledge, and treat the desiccated product as if it were the real world” (2013, 92–3). Neither can the phenomenological theologian subtract the subject’s experience of salvation from the process of knowing God, as if “objective” knowledge of God was the whole truth.

The danger of misrepresenting theological truth is treated in Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness*, where she argues that the analytic approach to knowledge of God is valuable but incomplete (2010, 47). On Stump’s view, there are kinds of knowledge that are irreducible to “knowledge that,” which leads her to outline two typologies: Dominican and Franciscan.

Metaphysics and theology, ethics and morality, can be understood and explained best, on Dominican views (typologically understood), by careful reasoning and argumentation [...] The ultimate foundation of reality for [the Franciscan] (typologically understood) is [...] personal, and for that reason knowledge of it will be a knowledge of persons. (2010, 46)

She therefore proposes narrative as a means of accessing “knowledge of persons” because:

in cases where necessary and sufficient conditions for something are hard to find or in the nature of things not available (for example, because what we are attempting to define is irreducibly vague), then Franciscan categorization or typology may in fact be more accurate, or at least more true to the phenomena, than Dominican categorization. A pretension to precision where none is available can also produce a clumsy, axe-hewn categorization, which misrepresents the thing it seeks to describe.' (2010, 47)

Descriptive phenomenology of the kind Sartre advocated also aims to exhibit the "Franciscan" virtue of being "true to the phenomena" it describes. This is significant for our consideration because a person of faith may find the divine attribute of benevolence, analytically approached, to be different enough from his or her experience of divine love to be counted a distinct (or even unrecognizable) phenomenon. I will say more about this in a moment, but before doing so it is worth mentioning that the "argumentocentric" conception of philosophy, as Simon Glendinning (2007, 23) calls it, has been criticized from other quarters of the analytic tradition for overemphasizing the ratiocinative and underestimating the place of the imagination in our thinking lives. With respect to moral philosophy, Cora Diamond has argued that unless we "bring imagination to bear on observation," or at least recognize that we have done so, the development of our arguments will prove "quite useless" (1996, 305, 306). To complement Stump's "narrative" approach, therefore, in what follows, I will outline some contributions that can be made by Sartrean phenomenology.

## Phenomenology and its discontents

Phenomenology has been regarded with some scepticism in analytic circles, and although recent work in cognitive phenomenology (e.g. Tim Bayne 2011) has begun to redress this reputation I would like to begin with Daniel Dennett's objection to phenomenology in *Consciousness Explained* (1991). This work is not recent, but Dennett's text raises pertinent questions about knowledge and belief, as well as subjectivity and objectivity. Before turning to the objection, however, it is necessary to make three points of clarification.

First, phenomenology is not an alternative epistemology. It is not interested in "gaining *propositional* knowledge" or "rational proof," but rather concerns lived commitment and "re-visioning" the world. For phenomenology, "clarity" in writing is not conceived as "the upshot of becoming convinced by an argument for an unambiguous statement or thesis," as Simon Glendinning writes, "but a matter of having come reflectively to terms with something pre-reflectively 'before one's eyes'" (2007, 23). To borrow Stanley Cavell's idiom, it is a matter not of knowledge but *acknowledgement* (1976, 238–66).

Second, it is important to take care in approaching phenomenological language: Heidegger's etymological approach to defining "phenomenology" gives us

“talk or discourse” about “that which shows itself” (1962, 34) but this – and even more so Sartre’s use of “appearance” in place of “phenomenon” – can be misleading to philosophers for whom the term “phenomenology” is already connoted with a distinction between appearance and reality. Sartre’s use of “appearance” in place of “phenomenon” may lead them to suppose that phenomenology is about how things seem rather than how they are.

Finally, in French phenomenological terms, “to appear” is to appear *to someone*, so phenomenology is often also described as a study of “experience.” But this term, too, may be laden with philosophical connotations that distort the phenomenologists’ intended meaning. Unlike the “experience” of empiricism, the “experience” of phenomenology is not the starting point of knowledge; instead, it is the object of phenomenological investigation. In this parlance, “experience” is not a pluralizable term; its meaning is better approximated in phrases like “the wisdom of experience.”

## Dennett

These confusions are evident in *Consciousness Explained*, where Dennett writes that “Philosophers and psychologists often use the term phenomenology as an umbrella term to cover all the items — the fauna and flora, you might say — that inhabit our conscious experience: thoughts, smells, itches, pains, imagined purple cows, hunches, and all the rest (1991, 44).” But, on his account, “Phenomenology has failed to find a single, settled method that everyone could agree upon. So while there are zoologists, there really are no phenomenologists: [which is to say there are no] uncontroversial experts on the nature of the things that swim in the stream of consciousness (1991, 44).” The problem, we read some pages later, is that phenomenologists make what Dennett calls “the first-person plural presumption (1991, 67).” If all the phenomenologist is talking about is the private contents of her own mind, Dennett objects, surely such a presumption is more than presumptuous – it is untestable and of limited (if any) value to others. It is a Trojan horse, we might say, smuggling in ‘subjective’ experience and calling it philosophy. Indeed, this perception may not be helped by the first paragraph of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on phenomenology, which states that “Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view (Smith 2013).”

But phenomenological reflection is not mere introspection. When a phenomenologist describes her experience – like the absence of an awaited friend, or the touch of a lover – she is describing not the contents of her own mind but the *world*. Her reader is supposed to recognize something in the description which provokes a relation to his own experience. Far from being untestable, as Katherine Morris writes, “we might say that our recognition is a *criterion of correctness* for a phenomenological description (2008, 29).”

It is not quite as simple as that, however. A complication arises because, to borrow Morris’s words again, “the failure to recognize the description may be due to intellectual prejudices (2008, 29).” We will turn to discuss these in greater depth in the next section of the paper, but first let us return to Dennett and the language of

appearing. Dennett gives an example in which anthropologists discover a hitherto-unknown tribe that believes in a forest-god called Feenoman. Upon discovery, Dennett outlines three possible approaches anthropologists may take toward the study of this tribe. (1) [the Feenomanists] go native, and “convert to the native religion and believe wholeheartedly in the real existence and good works of Feenoman”; (2) [the Feenomanologists] take an agnostic approach to “decide to study and systematize as best they can the religion of these people. They set down descriptions of Feenoman given by native informants. They look for agreement, but don't always find it [...]. Gradually a logical construct emerges: Feenoman the forest god, complete with a list of traits and habits and a biography (1991, 82–3)”—here we might find something like “benevolence,” which may or may not correspond well to the Feenomanists’ experience of divine love; (3) “remain neutral,” taking into account the reports of groups (1) and (2) and attempting to find out whether the *causes* of the Feenomanists’ beliefs are what they think they are (1991, 84).

On Dennett’s analogy, the phenomenologists, like the Feenomanologists, are simply cataloguing our beliefs about ourselves and our “life-world,” to use Wittgenstein’s term. But should the phenomenologist take those beliefs to be true—i.e. assume that the cause of a belief is sufficiently like what we *take* their cause to be—then they are open to refutation by the third group, the “neutrals.” Since Sartre does not “bracket off” existence (i.e. he takes the second approach above, cataloguing his beliefs about the world as if they are true), he seems to make this very assumption. But Sartrean phenomenology rejects the equation of “objectivity” with “remaining neutral.” And insofar as Dennett is representative of the analytic tradition in this respect, I take this to be problematic.

Katherine Morris offers what I take to be a convincing defence of early Sartrean phenomenology in this respect. First, she turns her attention to Dennett’s language, which reflects an antiquated notion of anthropology. In particular, his use of the word “belief” resembles that of J.G. Frazer (1922) and W.H.R. Rivers (1924), both well known in the anthropology of religion for seeing beliefs as opinions (which we might as well read “unjustified opinions”). But the word “belief,” in anthropology as in philosophy, is not straightforward. More recent anthropologists have noted the etymological roots of the word “belief”; it is related to “beloved” and the archaic “lief.” In its older use, as W. C. Smith notes,

The affirmation “I believe in God” used to mean: “Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to him my heart and soul...” Today, the statement may be taken by some as meaning: “Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not ... I announce that my opinion is “yes”. (W.C. Smith, quoted in Morris 2008, 37)

The point Morris makes is that for Dennett and his imaginary Feenomanologists, beliefs are opinions—which is to say, intellectual commitments to propositions—not commitments to ways of life. Analysis can help us understand such intellectual commitments, but—and we will return to this—as Pascal wrote in the *Pensées*, “The knowledge of God is very far from the love of him” (L77/B280).

Morris’s third objection to Dennett is that he takes the Feenomanists beliefs to

be proto-scientific: like Frazer before him, Dennett would likely attribute them to primitive error. This makes Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer applicable to Dennett, too: both present "primitive" practices as, Wittgenstein says, "so to speak, pieces of stupidity" (1979, 61). In anthropology today, however, the "proto-scientific" approach to analysis of human practices is "largely discounted" (Good 1994, 22). As Morris writes,

The old-style anthropologists who employed the term "belief" in connection with "primitive" tribes tended to use the word "knowledge" in reference to their *own* assented-to propositions, thereby suggesting that their own beliefs are true whereas those of the culture they are studying are false. (2008, 38)

This makes Dennett's label for the third group—and his own method—rather disingenuous. For although he claims to be "neutral," clearly his view of what it takes to falsify the Feenomanists beliefs is already determined. For Dennett, like Frazer-style anthropologists, *science* is the "arbiter between knowledge and belief" (Good 1994, 22). This scientism, in Morris's words, "embodies a veritable bouquet of intellectual prejudices" (2008, 39).

A final objection to Dennett, which brings us back to Oliver Crisp's mechanic example, is that there is a significant disanalogy between Dennett's anthropologists and phenomenologists. The Feenomanologists are studying other subjects—they observe the tribe from a third-person point of view. But the "tribe" observed by phenomenology is *us*—conscious humans in the world, on which it is not possible to take a truly "external" point of view. As Sartre wrote in the 1930s, of the emerging empirical science of psychology, such an approach fails to recognize the proximity of the investigator to the thing investigated (2012, 122). This point was further developed by Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (1962, xiv). No philosophy is done perspective-free, without presuppositions, and fruit can come of attending to our starting points.

All philosophy is subjective, on a phenomenological construal of the term, because all philosophy is done by situated subjects. But this is not to say that it is "subjective" in the first-person-presumptuous sense: it is not a matter of knowing the private contents of a mind. To return to the idea of intellectual prejudices, on Sartre's view, philosophy's prejudice for knowing over living has led to the impoverishment of experience. In particular, he accused his contemporaries of understanding "little besides epistemology" (1970, 5). In a passage which exhibits what Peter Caws calls "that peculiar taste for philosophical melodrama which has so alienated sceptical Anglo-Saxons from their excitable Continental colleagues" (Caws 1979, 66), Sartre writes that: "The description of knowledge is too often alimentary. There still remains too much of *prélogisme* in epistemological philosophy, and we are not yet rid of that primitive illusion (which we must account for later) according to which to know is to eat – that is, to ingest the known object, to fill oneself with it (*Erfillung*), and to digest it ('assimilation')" (2003, 210).

On the contrary, Sartre says, "our consciousness of things is by no means

limited to knowledge of them. *Knowledge ... is only one of the possible forms of my consciousness 'of this tree; I can also love it, fear it, hate it'* (1970, 5; emphasis added). The prejudice for knowing excludes or devalues other forms of consciousness—particularly the “lived experience” of the world. Contemporary phenomenologists might want to extend this list of lived experience to other “structures of consciousness” including: perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition, bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity (Smith 2013).

For those in the grip of this prejudice for knowing things (neutrally), “knowledge” is propositional; it is connected to probability and evidence or validation/invalidation (see Sartre 2003, 267–8): in other words, it is connected to inference. But proofs of this order do not convince. Drawing on Bergson, Sartre seems to distinguish between analysis as the method of the faculty of the intellect and intuition as the method of the faculty of intuition. He writes that:

There is only intuitive knowledge. Deduction and discursive argument, incorrectly called examples of knowing, are only instruments which lead to intuition. When intuition is reached, methods utilized to attain it are effaced before it; in cases where it is not attained, reason and argument remain as indicating signs which point toward an intuition beyond reach; finally if it has been attained but is not a present mode of my consciousness, the precepts which I use remain as the results of operations formerly effected. (Sartre 2003, 195)

What Sartre calls “the illusion of the primacy of knowledge” (Sartre 2003, 10, 12) leads philosophers to consider existential relationships as epistemological ones. For a person of faith, if the phrase “I believe in God” expresses not just propositional assent but a *lived experience* of commitment, then in order to understand that faith a propositional approach will not be adequate. To repeat Pascal: “The knowledge of God is very far from the love of him” (L77/B280). A phenomenology of faith might strive, therefore, as Glendinning writes of phenomenology in general, “not for new knowledge but *your acknowledgement*. [...] [W]hat characterizes an investigation in phenomenology is a work of convincing words which, in an age dominated by science, aims to cultivate and develop your capacity faithfully to retrieve (for) yourself (as from the inside) a radically re-vis(ion)ed understanding of yourself and your place in the world and with others” (2007, 27).

This personal transformation – the lived experience of the truth of faith – takes into account the situatedness of our convictions and the importance of our conduct in relation to them. After undergoing it, the faithful person should not be, like the philosophers of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, content to “interpret the world in various ways”; rather, they should realize that they, too, are responsible for what it is – and for changing it.

As Merold Westphal writes,

By describing the goal of reflection as relearning to see the world, existential phenomenology reminds the theologian that, while ‘seeing



is believing', according to a familiar adage, believing is not necessarily seeing. I can sincerely believe, for example, that the lives of the homeless poor of New York and Calcutta and the shanty-town poor of Africa and Latin America are of equal value to the lives of highly educated, highly affluent suburban Americans without seeing the former and myself in these terms. I can sincerely believe that my sins are forgiven by the grace of God and that justification is a gift and not a form of wages and still see myself as carrying a load of guilt that I must work off with pious practices. (2009, 271-272)

Westphal goes on to summarize his point concisely: "having my doxastic house in order is not the ultimate goal of theological discourse. It is rather *to bring my seeings (and thereby feelings and actions, since these arise more from my seeings than from my believings) into conformity with my best judgments about what is true*" (2009, 272).

## Conclusion: The goal(s) of theological discourse?

Analysis and inference can help us make judgments about what is true. But whether the philosophical tool is fit for the theological purpose depends on the task at hand. To whom do we speak? For what end? If a goal of theology is to help us know truths about God, and some of those truths are not propositional, then the analytic method *alone* is insufficient. And if a goal of theology is to edify those who assent to its propositional truths, then the analytic method needs a handmaid that pays greater attention to the *lived experience* of faith.

Before coming to a close, it is worth emphasizing that the 'convincingness deficit' is not exclusive to the philosophy of religion. To cite Cora Diamond again:

When we engage in philosophical discussion about a subject such as abortion, or the moral status of animals, *whom* should we think of ourselves as trying to convince? For if we proceed by giving *arguments*, we presumably do not expect to be able to convince anyone who is incapable of following our arguments, or who is too prejudiced to consider them. And if we are talking about convincing *human beings*, surely it is a fact about many of them that one certain way of *not* convincing them is to try arguing the case. ... No one who urges another philosopher to give arguments thinks of arguments as capable of convincing everybody. [...] argument is simply one way people approach moral questions, and there are other ways of trying to convince someone of one's view of animals or fetuses or slaves or children or whatever it may be. (1996, 292)

Bernard Williams argued, with respect to ethics, that there are cases where all analysis can do is assist the self-understanding of those whose reasoning already has

guidance from elsewhere. Williams says that an expansion of the emotions is required to see things differently; Sartre would likely argue that it is a matter of imagination.

The phenomenological approach, like the analytic one, may come with its own deficit if deployed in the wrong circumstances. But its goal is not to convince; rather, it is to edify, to help us re-vision the world. William James wrote of “live” and “dead” options that “deadness and liveness [...] are measured by [a thinker’s] willingness to act” (James 1912, section I). A phenomenological approach to faith seeks an understanding that is not only inferentially above reproach, but *lived* in integrity. It encourages us to attend to those forms of consciousness “of” God which are irreducible to “knowledge that,” and to make new options “live.”

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